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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a literature review that searched for afrocentric perspectives on human communication theory. The search described in the paper was focused on the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, reportedly one of the largest collections of African-American literature in the United States. The search described in the paper was done by researching key words in the subject card catalog and then studying entries relevant to communication arts. The search described in the paper reveals a rich abundance of material suitable for analysis in case study assignments, but the search did not reveal any theoretical frameworks unique to the African-American perspective. Contains 61 references. (Author/RS)

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IN SEARCH OF AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a literature review, by the author, in search of afrocentric perspectives on human communication theory. He focused his search in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is reportedly the largest collection of African-American literature in the United States. The search was done by researching key words in the subject card catalog and then studying entries relevant to communication arts. This inquiry revealed a rich abundance of material suitable for analysis in case study assignments but the inquiry did not reveal any theoretical frameworks unique to the African-American perspective. The process used in this inquiry and subsequent findings are described in the article.

IN SEARCH OF AFROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN COMMUNICATION

This article is a report of this author's efforts to locate, understand, and incorporate afrocentric perspectives on human communication into his teaching of courses in the communication arts curriculum. It has been a lengthy, thorough, and thought-provoking experience. Multiculturalism is a controversial topic in education and inclusion of afrocentric scholarship is an element of that controversy. Objectivity is a high priority when doing research but, due to the nature of the content of this report, a brief description of this author's background is appropriate.

The author is a white male middle-age professor at a small liberal arts college in Ohio. He completed his Ph.D. in 1982 and is an active researcher in cross-cultural communication. His interest with African-American scholarship grew from an awareness that pressures from multiculturalists may result in strong encouragement to modify the communication arts curriculum, a genuine curiosity in what afrocentric perspectives are (and how they differ from what he currently teaches), and a grant that supported his study of the aforementioned. He did not come into this project with a political agenda (he is politically moderate) nor does he have a hidden agenda in writing this article. It is merely a report of his findings.

His study of the subject began in the summer, 1991 when his college received a grant from the Lilly Foundation to, among other things, promote inclusion of African-American

scholarship in the curriculum. His research included six visits to Howard University in Washington D.C., recognized as the leading predominantly black college in the U.S. His visits to Howard included sitting in on classes, meeting with faculty & students, and most importantly, studying African-American scholarship in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is the "largest and the most valuable research library in America for the study of Negro life and history" and "the most comprehensive and interesting group of books by Negroes ever collected in the world" (The Arthur B. Spingarn Collection of Negro Authors, 1947, pp. 1 & 7). Such a comprehensive collection of African-American scholarship offers a unique opportunity to study African-American contributions in a variety of areas. His study at the Center is the foundation for the findings reported in this article. Since it is recognized as the largest collection of African-American scholarship in the U.S., the author views it as a collective voice for African-American thought.

It is speculated that by the year 2000 33% of school age children in the U.S. will be of non-European origin. Thus, there is a belief that our academic curriculums should be representative of these non-European perspectives. Thorough modifications will be a lengthy process. Calls for a more inclusive curriculum, representative of the multicultural composition of American society, have come from a variety of

sources (Williams, 1990; Viadero, 1992; Gordon & Bhattacharyya, 1992). One frequently hears that we need emphasis on education as a means to help American society get along with itself (in the area of inter-racial/ethnic relations). One can speculate an inclusive curriculum, representative of the subcultural groups that compose America, will appeal to the diverse audience educated in America today and tomorrow.

As previous stated, inclusion of afrocentric perspectives in the communication arts curriculum is the topic of this article. It is one piece of the total multiculturalism curriculum reform picture and, because of the nature of race relations in the U.S., it is one of the more controversial aspects. Again, it is understood that in the larger multiculturalism picture communication arts is but one of the many disciplines slated for modification and the afrocentric view is but one of the subcultural views to be included in curriculum reform.

A review of literature on the subject of curriculum development and multicultural inclusiveness reveals little that deals with models for curricular development specifically in communication arts. However, much has been written on curriculum development and multicultural inclusiveness that can be applied in communication arts and other disciplines within the social sciences. Helle Bering-Jensen (1990) recommends inclusion of minority contributions in classroom content as a means of supplementing eurocentric

perspectives. Beverly Tatum (1992) offers strategies for overcoming student resistance to race related content. Emphasis on inclusion of culturally diverse works of literature is described in Pfordresher (1992) and Post (1992). Michael Harris (1992) suggests one means of addressing racial problems is to promote inclusion of African and African-American content in U.S. public schools. Kerry Feldman (1992) emphasizes how anthropology departments can be helpful in choosing multicultural education components. Jerry Gaff (1992) claims that multiculturalism has won the war against eurocentrism and that we should move to the next step of creating inclusive programs that are educationally valuable. These views obviously point to the goal of an expanded curriculum.

The author approached his research on African-American scholarship as an opportunity to substantively augment his academic orientation. One could merely use a recipe approach of "just add African-American readings and stir" but this would only allow for cosmetic changes. Rather, this author approached this as he did his graduate school years. Knowledge learned was intended to become part of his theoretical fabric. Such an approach takes time and thorough analysis. His graduate training was a long indepth period of study. Any serious modifications of that foundation should come through a similar path.

The communication arts discipline covers a wide range of subject areas including public speaking, interpersonal

communication, organizational communication, mass media, rhetoric, journalism, public relations, broadcasting, theater, and cross-cultural studies. The author has focused on five courses he teaches: Rhetorical Communication Theory, Mass Media in America, Persuasion, Communication in the Organization, and a Unity in Diversity course. A majority of the works are most appropriate in the Unity in Diversity course.

The author used a variety of key words to search for information relevant to communication arts in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. The seven most useful key words were rhetoric, communication, narration, persuasion, political oratory, nonverbal communication, and interpersonal relations. The following lists, in parentheses, the number of relevant titles found under each key word heading: rhetoric (36), communication (75), narration (71), persuasion (6), political oratory (7), nonverbal communication (17), and interpersonal relations (35).

The aforementioned titles total 247. The author reviewed these 247 titles and other relevant materials located in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. As earlier stated, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is recognized as a comprehensive collection of African-American scholarship so this author recognizes it as the most logical place to search for afrocentric perspectives on human communication. It is "one of the world's largest and most comprehensive repositories for the documentation of the history and

culture of people of African descent" (Congressional Record, 1989).

Representative works reviewed in this process, regarding the key words noted, include African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity (Asante & Asante, 1990), Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge (Asante, 1990), The Anatomy of Black Rhetoric (Payne, 1982), A Comparative Study of Two Approaches for Analyzing Black Discourse (Phillips, 1983), Rhetoric of Racial Hope (Hill, 1976), Handbook of Intercultural Communication (Asante, Newmark, & Blake, 1979), Black Communication (Mullen, 1982), From Behind the Black Veil: A Study of African-American Narrative (Stepto, 1979,, Transracial Communication (Smith, 1973), Contemporary Black Thought (Asante & Vandi, 1980), Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America (Smith, 1972), and Afrocentricity (Asante, 1989).

The search for afrocentric perspectives on human communication, that can be used in courses in the communication arts curriculum, is hindered by obstacles. Most notable is that a vast majority of the works studied by this author focus on the plight & victimization of African-Americans, afrocentrism, and lobbying for better treatment of African-Americans. There is an abundance of rich material that can be analyzed as case studies using communication theories for such case study interpretation, but the problem rests on finding communication theories unique to African-American perspectives.

This author has sought communication theories, authored by African-American scholars, that are theoretically central to his courses. For example, in the Interpersonal Communication course, descriptions of African-American interpersonal communication can be used for case study analysis but these descriptions do not necessarily equate with being well grounded theoretical perspectives themselves.

Another problem is that one cannot be sure if the author of a book or journal article is African-American. Even though the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is a library of African and African-American scholarship it also has material by non-black authors. For example, Harry Triandis is included in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. Thus, this author assumed Triandis was African-American until he met the daughter of Triandis and she conveyed he is not African-American.

A related question is "can a non-African-American be a credible scholar on African-American perspectives?". Would a native of Kenya (who came to the U.S. as an adult scholar) have greater license in understanding the African-American perspective than a European-American born and raised in Harlem? What distinctions are there in this regard and how are they constructed?

The author finds this to be a relevant line of questioning in that some native African-Americans, born and raised in the United States, have been labeled as not being "authentic" African-Americans (i.e. Shelby Steele, author of

By the Content of Our Character, and U.S. Supreme Court Judge Clarence Thomas). Are there "imitation" African-Americans among us? What is the litmus test for such a distinction? Should their writings not be regarded as African-American scholarship? On one visit at Howard University this author, while wrestling with these questions, encountered a library reference clerk who was wearing a sweatshirt that proclaimed the statement "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand". The confusion regarding who can be an "authentic" African-American scholar seems to be commensurate with the sweatshirted message.

Conveying African-American perspectives in the classroom poses a sensitive lecturing issue. Particularly, how far should an instructor go in acknowledging authorship of a particular viewpoint as being African-American? This author sat in on a lecture where the instructor clarified authorship of a perspective as African-American and some African-American students found acknowledgement of the African-American source to be patronizing. The larger issue becomes "should the ethnic/racial background of all theorists be acknowledged?".

Another classroom issue deals with evolving language norms regarding how non-white groups are labeled. For instance, one student sparked heated discussion when she said she was confused by the label "people of color". Her point being it is a senseless expression because: 1) white is a color, thus everybody is a person of color and 2) what is the

difference between "colored person" and a "person of color"? This was followed up by the statement African-Americans do not like to be called "colored people"...which was rebutted with "Why does the leading organization of African-Americans, who don't like to be called 'colored people', have their organization titled 'National Association for the Advancement of Colored People?'". These classroom issues are relevant because the reason this author is searching for afrocentric perspectives on human communication is so he can convey them in the classroom.

In this study of African-American communication arts scholars the most prominent name this researcher found was Molefi Asante. Molefi Asante is arguably one of the most important writers regarding the African-American perspective. On the May 12, 1993 showing of ABC's "Nightline" (Nightline, May 12, 1993) Asante was interviewed by Ted Koppel regarding the content and legitimacy of the African-American perspective. He was a key-note speaker at the 1995 annual national meeting of the Speech Communication Association (the primary professional organization in speech-communication). Asante is presently the chair of the Black Studies Department at Temple University. Given his stature in and outside of academia Asante is an African-American scholar who can be studied as a key player in the development of African-American thought. As such, the content of his writings can be viewed as exemplifying the African-American perspective.

Koppel introduced Asante as an important figure in

African-American studies and, during the interview, Asante stated "I have written 33 books and 200 articles (in black studies)" (Nightline, May 12, 1993). This author researched Asante's works at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and found 24 books listing Asante as author or co-author (some of these books are listed under the name Arthur L. Smith, the previous name of Molefi Asante). Of the communications related books, 63% are edited books. That is, Asante did not write the books but he did invite other authors to write chapters in the books. Seventy-one percent of these books are co-edited with other individuals. Twenty-seven percent of these books are authored soley by Asante.

A review of communications related works, attributed to Asante, sheds light on his perspective. This will be done in chronological order. Under his previous name, Arthur L. Smith, Asante edited Language, Communication and Rhetoric in Black America (Smith, 1972) that describes "communicative experiences of black Americans". He then authored Transracial Communication (Smith, 1973) that analyzes black-white interaction from a black perspective. In 1979, he co-edited the Handbook of Intercultural Communication (Asante, Newmark, & Blake, 1979) that focuses on intercultural communication dynamics.

Contemporary Black Thought (Asante & Vandi, 1980) was co-edited by Asante. He wrote three chapters dealing with international and intercultural relations, the "communication person", and television's impact on the language of black

children. The same year he also co-authored A Guide to African and African-American Art (Asante & Welsh, 1980) which is a 40 page pamphlet describing art linked to the African tradition.

Two books deal specifically with the African tradition. The Great Zimbabwe: An Ancient African City-State (Asante, 1983) that Asante edited and The Rhythms of Unity: A Bibliographic Essay in African Culture (Asante & Asante, 1985) that Asante co-edited. Obviously, these two books are related to African-American scholarship in communication arts only in that Africa provides a foundation for African-American thought.

A similarly titled book, African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity, was co-edited by Molefi Asante. This book describes African culture, dance, education, time awareness, socialism and personality (Asante & Asante, 1985). Yet another book with the same title and authors, African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity (Asante & Asante, 1990), elaborates on the previous book of the same title. This book was preceded by Afrocentricity (Asante, 1989). It is a 100 page booklet that describes Afrocentric views on science, sociology, black liberation and oppression. Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge (Asante, 1990) gives Asante's perspective on the oppression of blacks.

His work exemplifies the previously mentioned rich abundance of material, authored by African-American writers, that can be analyzed in case study analysis using

communication theories. However, Asante does not offer communication theories or conceptual frameworks unique to African-American perspectives. This author has used material, authored by African-Americans, for case study analysis in class and found such applications to work well with a wide range of college audiences. The idea of African-American scholarship and development of African-American studies academic departments has been debated by a variety of sources. Some of these positions will be described to provide representative understanding of the issue.

On the aforementioned May 12, 1993 "Nightline" segment, Anthony Martin, a Black Studies professor at Wellsley College, defended why he uses a textbook authored by the Nation of Islam that says Jews are genetically proned to enslaving others. Martin explained "I have a right to interpret my history" (Nightline, May 12, 1993). On the same show Dinesh D'Souza, from the American Enterprise Institute, stated black studies departments were founded in the 1960's as a result of political pressure, colleges have let black studies go unchecked, and black studies does not have clear standards for evaluating scholarship (Nightline, May 12, 1993).

Leon Jaroff, in an article entitled "Teaching Reverse Racism", writes "the afrocentric movement (which) is intended to acquaint U.S. blacks with their long ignored African heritage and raise their self-esteem" (Jaroff, 1994, p. 74). He explains an African-American perspective that is taught at

Southern Methodist University maintains "all Egyptians were black, and their abundance of the dark skin pigment, melanin, not only made them more humane and superior to lighter-skinned people in body and mind but also provided such paranormal powers as ESP (extrasensory perception) and psychokinesics" (Jaroff, 1994, p. 74).

Mary Lefkowitz, Professor of Classics at Wellesley College, offers her view of afrocentric perspectives in a Chronicle of Higher Education article titled "Combating False Theories in the Classroom" (Lefkowitz, 1994). "If afrocentric assertions, despite the passion with which they are put forward, cannot be supported by evidence, statistics, or facts, why do such courses remain in the curricula of legitimate colleges and universities?" (Lefkowitz, 1994, pp. 1-2). "Unfortunately, many colleges and universities today are allowing professors to invoke academic freedom to teach material that until recently would never have appeared in any educational curriculum, much less in a university. Such materials include the absurd propositions, sometimes lumped under afrocentrism, that Europeans are 'ice people' who are genetically inferior to the 'sun people' of Africa, that Greeks stole their philosophy from Egypt, and that Jews were primarily responsible for the slave trade. Reputable scholars have repeatedly produced evidence that these statements are false, but it has consistently been ignored by afrocentrists" (Lefkowitz, 1994, p. 1). She supports her assertion with an example of the "...afrocentric claim

Aristotle stole his philosophy from the Library of Alexandria (which was not built until after Aristotle's death)" (Lefkowitz, 1994, p. 1).

In Campus, Craig Hymowitz and Alan Sauers state "Black Studies launched itself not into a serious study of black culture or history, but instead into revisionism--the creation of a culture of victimization and phony historical record with an eye more toward building black self-esteem than uncovering historical fact" (1994, p. 6). The article is titled "In Search of Self-Esteem: The Corruption of Black Studies".

Other events, less directly related to black studies departments, have hurt the credibility of African-American scholarship. Martin Luther King is perhaps the most widely recognized African-American of the 20th century. Revelations by The Journal of American History (Thelen, 1991) and Chronicle of Higher Education (Raymond, 1991) that King plagiarized parts of his Ph.D. dissertation could possibly smear the credibility of African-American scholars. "King frequently did not credit the sources for words he claimed to be his own....The word, of course, is plagiarism" (Thelen, 1991, p. 14). That Boston University did not revoke King's Ph.D., upon discovering the plagiarism, exemplifies how sensitive this issue is.

Regarding the larger issue of multiculturalism, John Leo blames CUNY's (the City University of New York's) decline on multiculturalism. Leo quotes Heather MacDonald as saying

"CUNY is at the cutting edge of a nationwide movement to do away with the very distinction between academic proficiency and deficiency and replace it with the concept of competence in one's own culture" (Leo, August 15, 1994, p. 20). Three months later, Leo wrote about an estrangement connected to the rise of multiculturalism. "The shift has to do more with morally dubious moves taking place behind the word 'diversity'.... As long as ordinary white male workers are seen through ideological lenses as patriarchal overlords who deserve to be brushed aside, race-and-gender balkanization will accelerate..." (Leo, November 21, 1994, p. 3).

In an essay titled "The Search for Virtues", Lance Morrow responds to multiculturalism and its effects on societal virtues by describing William Bennet's The Book of Virtues. "The American challenge now is not to pay homage to every ethnic sensitivity, but rather to encourage universally accepted ideals of behavior: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty and faith" (Morrow, March 7, 1994, p. 78).

Gary Trudeau's politically oriented comic strip Doonesbury featured a ten day series that comments on the shortcomings of multiculturalism. The series begins with a math professor who is complimenting his students on their incorrect guesses in class. He is accused of giving a racist grade of B+ by the recipient who feels disempowered and marginalized because of the grade. The student, a white male, explains his answer may be incorrect to the professor

but that his culture teaches the incorrect answer, thus he should receive credit for his answer.

The student goes on to explain receiving a bogus grade shows professorial disrespect for his community (a greek lettered fraternity). The student feels victimized by the low expectations of the professor. The student then initiates a lawsuit against the professor claiming discrimination against the "Greco-American athletic community". The professor, seeking to understand the plight of the student, is told "it's a Greek thing--you wouldn't understand" (Trudeau, 1993).

Edwin Delattre comments on multiculturalism by saying "At Harvard, no undergraduate student is required to study western culture, though most must study a non-western ('foreign') culture in order, as the catalog says, 'to provide fresh perspectives on ones own cultural assumptions and traditions.' There is no mention of assessing, say, the assumptions and traditions of non-western caste systems, non-western institutionalized slavery, non-western political tyranny, and non-western genocide" (Delattre, 1990, p. 22). In a similar vein, Princeton University historian Bernard Lewis writes "while the phenomenon of slavery is universal, what is distinctively western is the movement for the abolition of slavery" (Lewis, 1990, p. 4).

Shelby Steele, an African-American professor, offers a rejoinder view of the direction higher education should take regarding African-Americans. "What we need now is a new

spirit of pragmatism in racial matters where blacks are seen simply as American citizens who deserve complete fairness and in some cases developmental assistance, but in no case special entitlements based on color" (Steele, 1990, p. 91). Steele concluded "The white message to blacks must be: America hurt you badly and that is wrong, but entitlements only prolong the hurt while development overcomes it" (Steele, 1990, p. 91).

Locating afrocentric perspectives is a goal that must be closely followed by an understanding of how to convey the perspectives in the classroom. This researcher has been a student and/or teacher in higher education since 1973. He has seen attempts from the perspectives of student and teacher. As a college sophomore at a small liberal arts college, he experienced a required course titled "Black Studies". This course was taught to students who did not want to take the course, taught by faculty who did not want to teach it, and kept in the catalog by administrators afraid to drop it. He believes the problem occurred because faculty were assigned to teach the course and had little, if any, input into what was taught. Multiculturalizing the curriculum should be based on ownership by each faculty member. It is difficult to believe a faculty member can be forced to adopt unfamiliar material for application in the classroom and teach it in a competent manner. A more successful approach would create an environment, through the use of incentives, that encourages individual faculty members

to discover a variety of cultural perspectives and build upon what he/she already knows.

The idea of ownership can also be an effective motivating influence with students as well. Such an approach empowers students to discover and celebrate various cultural perspectives on classroom subject matter. This can be done through class assignments stressing independent research. Independent student research findings, shared in the classroom, can enhance the learning experience of all students in a course and the professor. Thus, lifelong learning occurs for all involved.

This researcher is a faculty member at a small liberal arts college. The mission statement of the college encourages all members of the academic community "to contemplate truth and share with others the fruits of this contemplation". The search for truth is a consistent referent. The findings presented in this article are the product of this researcher's search for truth. The findings are not meant to be the conclusive last word on the subject. Rather, they are a contribution toward that end.

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